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AFRICA CONTRA HEGEL

NECROPOLITICS, NONPOLITICS AFRICA, MBEMEB, POSTCOLONIALISM

There was once a fantasy, shared by left and right alike, that the states of the under-developed world could come, whether by leaps or by steps, to approximate those of the so-called developed world, as if they represented some kind of historical destiny. This idea belongs to what one might call an *imaginary*, or what Bottici calls the *imaginal*: a world of signification that enables its unity and identity to be thought and enacted.

For a long time, I found it helpful to borrow a term used by Paul Gilroy and others and think rather of an *over-developed* world, as if the industrialized states had somehow overshot their historical destiny and ended up in some caricature of futurity. Lately, I've been tempted to reverse the direction, and think of postcolonial states not as failed approximations of their colonizers, but to think of those former colonizing states as increasingly coming to resemble the ones they colonized.

It is hard not to look at American political and cultural life and not see strong similarities with third world states – including failed ones. But this too is merely to play ironically within a geopolitical imaginary in which historical time is at least supposed to have an orientation and a destiny. Perhaps one could go much further in undoing certain fixed contours of the geographic and historical imaginary.

Not the least merit of the writings of Achille Mbembe is the distance he manages to create, not so much from, as *within* such geopolitical imaginaries. I take the operational premise of his work to be that, while one cannot claim to be exempt from such an imaginary, one can map its contours from the inside. "Domination consists, for the dominators, and for all others, in sharing the same phantasms." (231) While not his latest work, his most accessible to Anglophone readers is *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2001) and so I'll concentrate on that.

These are texts about the political-cultural imaginary that is Africa, as something that exists in the colonial imagination, and whose effects remain in what he calls the *postcolony*. Neither the discourse of African liberation and national self-determination, nor its neoliberal successor have really replaced that colonial imaginary. Time isn't linear or cumulative in Mbembe. Pasts and presents can have quite entangled relations with each other.

The Africa that appeared in the colonial imaginary is incomplete, mutilated, not quite human, perhaps what Gilroy calls

infrahuman. It is a place of the strange and monstrous, but also of the familiar and intimate. It is a place for world-historical experiments – but not for Africans. Mbembe quotes Hegel to ironic effect on this: “Intractability is the distinguishing feature of the negro character. The condition in which they live is incapable of development or culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been. In the face of the enormous energy of sensuous arbitrariness which dominates their lives, morality has no determinate influence upon them.”

But rather than a moral critique of this sort of writing – of which examples could be multiplied – Mbembe does something else. He makes Africa the actual location where this imaginary place undoes the self-creation of the very colonizing subject who proclaims and enacts it. The Africa the west imagines is, among other things, the *locus solus* where that imaginary comes apart.

We colonizing peoples have a hard time with species-being. Africa has to be the prop of difference of last resort. There's not much writing about Africa for itself. “More precisely, Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity.” (3) Africa is where things just are, lacking any justification or logic. Time is time immemorial, lacking dynamics. Africa lacks being. Rather than having a different being to the west, it lacks being at all.

Africa reveals the problem of writing about the collapse of worlds. It is taken as unstable, but this instability is read as chaotic. “The upshot is that while we now feel we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not*, we still know absolutely nothing about *what they actually are*.” (9) Social theory takes the first industrialization in Europe as a default model. The link between modernity, rationalism and the west appears as more than contingent. The west remains distinct (although there are exceptions, such as the interesting case of Joseph Needham).

Critical theory has various objections to modernity, against positivism as an excrescence of a rationality of means, or reason as a mask of domination, or the alienation of the direct producer, or technology as metaphysics, or against the teleology and totality of enlightenment, and so on. But the rationality critiqued is still assumed to be western. Starting from conventions that are local, social theory remains provincial. But Mbembe does not particularly want to extend the critical or emancipatory project of the west to the African scene. He is not interested in an African modernity and its claim to an African humanity: “both the asserted denial and the reaffirmation of that humanity now look like the two sterile sides to the same coin.” (12)

Rather, he disrupts the whole spatial and temporal scheme of modernity. Mbembe: “What distinguishes our age from previous ages, the breach over which there is apparently no going back, the absolute split of our times that breaks up the spirit and splits it into many, is again contingent, dispersed, and powerless existence: existence that is contingent, dispersed, and powerless but reveals itself in the guise of arbitrariness and the absolute power to give death at anytime, anywhere, by any means, and for any reason... This is, then, the arbitrariness that accomplishes its own work and validates itself through its own sovereignty, and thereby permits power to be exercised as a right to kill and invests Africa with deaths at once at the heart of every age and above time.” (13)

The colonial situation is one in which the colonizer cannot recognize him or herself in the eyes of the colonized, for the colonized is not granted the status of a rival subject but remains a thing. “Colonial discourse is an aberrant product of the madness that threatens all domination.” (181) To the colonizer, the African has no needs or debts, prefers to be lazy and poor, is untrustworthy and irresponsible, hysterical and feminine, an animal or a thing. The land itself then appears without master. The colonizer inherits no responsibility, but is surrounded by a noisy and excessive nature. The colonized is just what appears, a body to be seized, harassed, compelled, or as one of a group to be counted, classified, and so on.

In the colonial imaginary, the colonized doesn't really have being. It just exists, without reason, the way a rock does. It is nothing, and the colonizer's only action in regard to it is negation, annihilation, an exhausting violence. And yet the colonized is also there to be enjoyed. All that matters are the whims or desires of the colonizer and his *commandment*. Mbembe: “But what would the colony be, if not a place where the European, freed not only of inhibitions but of any need to keep watch on his or her imagination, reveals his or her ‘other’ self?” (185) Colonial discourse is an auto-erotic incantation. “As a miraculous act, colonialism frees the conquerors desires from the prison of law, reason, doubt, time, measure. Thus, to have been colonized is, somehow, to have dwelt close to death.” (189)

This is the problem of colonial existence for the colonizer: how to exist in a world where one dominates mere things, incapable of recognizing that they are dominated? Hence “...the colonizer is only conscious of self in the enjoyment of the thing that he or she produces and possesses, and the appetite this brings.” (189) The colonizer projects himself outwards, becomes obsessed with hierarchy, counting, judging, eliminating. But it is enervating. “A time has got farther away, leaving behind only a field of ruins, an immense weariness, an infinite distress, and a need for vengeance and rest.” (199)

The colonizer produces nothing but a wearying enjoyment of things that neglect to cohere into a coherent story in time that might point forward. “As a result of sticking together these bits of the actual, colonial discourse ends up producing a closed, solitary totality that it elevates to the rank of a generality. And so reality becomes enclosed within a pre-ordained madness. How could it be otherwise, since the actual is no longer perceived except through the mirror of a perversity that is, in truth, that of the subject uttering this discourse?” (178)

The imaginary of the colony state makes it the organizer of public happiness. But in practice it had no such extensive power.

Sovereignty is arbitrary and cruel, as there is no underlying covenant. Sovereignty thinks of itself as a gift to the colonized. The native is at best a protégé. The imaginary of the postcolony appears to inherit that of the colony. But in what sense is it 'post'? The postcolony inherits from the colony a time that isn't linear or sequential. It is made up of disturbances, interlocking situations, some reversible. It calls into question the times of social theory, their developmental assumptions, of take-off and take-off failure. There may be non-modern times that are not anti-modern. But in any case the horizon of the future is closed.

Governing, before and after colonization, is a matter of *commandment*, which rests on an imaginary of state sovereignty. Sovereignty rests in turn on a founding violence that gives the state the sole power to judge. That founding violence is converted into authority without constraint. To this is joined a kind of everyday violence, in acts and rituals. Anything contesting this violence as law is savage and outlaw. Sovereignty is exercised as an indiscriminate force that disqualifies its own negation.

No questions arise as to the ends of commandment. It is purely a matter of means. "The lack of justice of the means, and the lack of legitimacy of the ends, conspired to allow an arbitrariness and intrinsic unconditionality that may be said to have been the distinctive feature of colonial sovereignty. Postcolonial state forms have inherited this unconditionality and the regime of impunity that was its corollary." (26)

Commandment acts with impunity because what it commands is to it an animal. This goes back to colonial times. The native is alien to the colonizer. The native is an animal with a bundle of drives but to abilities. There can only be domination. In Hegelian terms, the native cannot be the means via which spirit realizes itself. It is possible to sympathize with the colonized, but only in the same way as the colonizer has affection for animals. The animal can be domesticated, groomed, but is not human. To the colonizer, the colonized has only animal needs: to drink, eat, fuck, not human possibilities.

Commandment crosses a boundary between what elsewhere might be public and private. It shouts its commands at any time. Commandment is outside common law, in a time and place of permanent exception. There is a delegation of rights to companies and colonizers, along with privileges and immunities. Commandment thinks it is both ruling and civilizing, but the latter just means incorporation into production, through coercion and corruption. The colonized are not recognized as having rights.

Civil society presupposes a distinction between public and private power. The colony lacks such distinctions. Nor does it have a distinction between right and force. Civil society presupposed autonomous institutions. Civil society contains a tension between inclusion and equality and exclusion and inequality (on which see Chantal Mouffe). The colony and postcolony lack this doubly: as indigenous social forms and as colonial ones. Of course, there is much variation in the combinations of pre-existing power and colonial power, and whether the postcolony is about exploiting mineral resources or cash crops. But in none of these various cases was the state formed out of reciprocity of obligations between a state and a people. There is no duty of protection.

The postcolonial state affirms the more despotic aspects of the colonial one, itself resting on indigenous power forms, sometimes reinvented for the occasion. These were often authoritarian regimes. However, for a while, postcolonial states did manage some measure of allocation of enjoyments and utilities. There was no relation between job and salary, or salary and wealth produced. Jobs were distributed by the state to secure loyalty and gratitude and model a form of obedience for the population. Salaries made subjection seem legitimate. They were not based on any imaginary of political equality and equal representation, but quite the opposite. Rather, they were claims via which the state created debts on society. They were about redistribution, not equivalence. "The means of livelihood he or she received were not designed to reward a process of converting energy into wealth, but were helping shape a particular figure of submission and domination." (45)

Economic things were converted into social and political things. It was a triple process: a state take-over of society, a socialization of state power, and a privatization of public prerogatives. Mbembe: "the allocation of utilities and means of livelihood has taken the form of a practically uncontrolled extension of the chain of privileges, material benefits, and enjoyments that the ruling clique has arrogated to itself." (49)

With the end of the cold war and rise of global vectors of communication and trade, these states did not do well. It was not possible to turn them into productive combinations for world markets. The salary regime gave way to survival strategies, including quasi-criminal ones among the rank and file of the armed forces, with a culture of raids and booty, and an economy that looks more like war. Africa economies went underground. What export growth there is can't cover debt repayments.

Between the state and the individual was family, kin, lineage, but these forms are weakening. There is a generalization of war, and of forms of political mobilization that are neither transitions to democracy nor disintegration. Casual and informal work becomes the rule. There is a general lack of security. Urban mobs, land shortage, refugee movements, mercenaries, criminalization of the ruling classes and the militarization of trade become endemic. The implosion of the public sector blocks intra-communal transfers. There is a compensatory rise of Pentacostal religions, Islam, and so on. The withering of the state is also a withering of the market.

The postcolony now offers a form of private indirect government and "novel technologies of domination" (67) Is this the final defeat of the state? Or a deepening of its local form? A weakened of sovereignty gives way to the tutelage of creditors, ending the claims of citizens on the state, and undermining of fragile claim of the state to legitimacy. The state no longer has the solvency that would enable it to act. It lacks the money and the goods and the administrative order to do its job. Mbembe: "the state no longer has credit with the public." (76)

So there is a restructuring of domination on other grounds: "the future of the state will be settled, as has happened previously in the world, at the point where the three factors of war, coercion and capital (formal or informal, material or symbolic) meet." (77) There are sales of public assets, an end to monopolies, the privatization of infrastructure, and a transfer of public resources to private capital, a privatization of sovereignty, and of the means of coercion. "... one characteristic of the historical sequence unfolding in Africa is the direct link that now exists between, on the one hand, deregulation and the primacy of the market and, on the other, the rise of violence and the creation of private military, paramilitary, or jurisdictional organizations." (78) To which one could add the purely privatized enclaves studied by Keller Easterling: "At its most extreme, the very existence of the postcolonial state as a general technology of domination is at risk." (79)

The population become clients managed no longer through state salaries, but through controlling access to the parallel economy. Offices are goods to be traded. People are no longer bound in networks of obligation, but subject to extortion and confiscation. Taxation is without representation and even without public utility in exchange. All this with international support, feeding a cascade of rent seekers. As in Benjamin Bratton, this may signal the exhaustion of model of territorial state and the emergence of a new kind of geopolitics.

Mbembe: "As a result of these dynamics of territorial realignment and spatial dislocation, the real map of the continent is in the process of being reshaped along regional and international axes of traffics that both overlap and transcend the historic routes and networks of the nineteenth century trade expansion." (86) With this comes a resurgence of local identities. And of war, but which does not lead to consolidating a state apparatus. But Mbembe does not want to put these developments on the old timeline of development or decline: "... nothing allows us to say that, in the long run, prosperity and democracy cannot be born out of crime." (93) Perhaps, as in Kojin Karatani, the spread of religious and cult phenomena are signs of new value systems emerging.

What was extended to the colonies was a tradition in which a sovereign is in charge of life, property, and the honor of their subjects. The postcolony has distinctive styles of political improvisation, and creates its own imaginary world of meaning. "In the postcolony, the commandment seeks to institutionalize itself, to achieve legitimation and hegemony in the form of the fetish." (103) Or at least it tries to. The fetish is an object that aspires to be made sacred, but the fetish in the form of the body of the autocrat becomes unaccountable, arbitrary, reflecting only on itself.

Everyday life in the postcolony is not about resistance or collaboration, but is convivial, domestic, familiar and at worst resulting in a "zombification" of both the dominant and dominated. But it may also be a ludic world of play. There is a gap between state-projected images and how people play with these. There are ways people wriggle out of commandment. Commandment is connected not only to play but to the carnivalesque... the purest expression of commandment is conveyed by a total lack of restraint, a great delight too in getting really dirty. Debauchery and buffoonery go hand in hand." (108) The postcolony is chaotic and lacks a stable sign system. It is a regime of unreality, a hollow simulacrum, the fetish of power is a sham and becomes just a thing again.

"The commandment aspires to act as a total cosmology for its subjects – yet, owing to the very oddity of this cosmology, popular humor causes it, quite often unintentionally, to capsize." (109) Commandment is extravagant, as has to feed itself and its retinue and clients, and has to show publicly that it can do so. It is sumptuous, yet has to have both style and harshness, combining sexual subordination and anxious virility, commandment becomes a zombie.

Carnival praxis is hardly blasphemy or sacrilege, and is more like a bodily mythology, a theophagy, a god devoured by its worshippers. Commandment is a right to punish, not to make useful. Commandment is a requisitioning of bodies for an economy of death. It is a permanent public displays of grandeur, but also of the loss of limits and of any sense of proportion. It propagates a cant language, implausible but locally intelligible, dogmatic and pseudo-religious.

There is a thirst for prestige, honors, gratitude, and no shortage of middlemen who preach before the fetish of power, rewarding its narcissistic self-gratification. What is really central to commandment is the bodies of those commanded, which are used to entertain the powerful. Various cultural remnants from pre-colonial times are pressed into service. "Wearing the party uniform, with the image of the head of state printed on it, women have followed the rhythm of the music and swung their torsos forward and back; elsewhere, they have pulling in and thrust out their bellies, their undulating movement evoking as usual the slow, prolonged penetration of the penis and its staccato retreat." (123)

Commandment has a right to enjoy everything. "To exercise authority is, above all... for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and... in Labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.' The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system." (110)

The postcolonial imaginary is richly corporeal: "the mouth, the belly, and the penis constitute the classic ingredients of commandment in the postcolony." Commandment is not just control but also conviviality and connivance. Ordinary people are constantly compromised, but find ways to deceive and play with power rather than confront it. The commanded body breaks into laughter, which depletes the meaning of commandment. Mbembe: "the public affirmation of the 'postcolonial subject' is not

necessarily found in acts of 'opposition' or 'resistance' to the commandment. This isn't quite performativity as one finds it in Judith Butler. What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid and modifiable even when there are clear, written and precise rules." (129) Relation between rulers and ruled becomes simulated in a hierarchy of mock honors, privileges distributed for compliance, creating networks of indebtedness and subordination.

In this imaginary world, everything has gone underground. The autocrat, is both remote and close. He is everything at the same time, the all-purpose man, with an endless capacity to multiply identities. He is president "for life." But the autocrat is also a thing, an absolute subjectivity. "Since there is no subject apart from him, he is incapable of seeing himself as mortal.." (163) He becomes an arbitrary thing, and so, "... voided of what he takes to be his substance, the autocrat, raw power, no longer belongs to the universe of crude, laughable, capricious things." (164) The absolute doesn't exist in reality, so the autocrat's version is a caricature. His fear of mortality perpetuates itself as murder, as a reign of impunity. The autocrat's subjects are made to laugh and dance in spite of themselves. "How then does one live when the time to die has passed, when it is even forbidden to be alive...?" (201)

It is hard to say to what the genre of these extraordinary texts of Achille Mbembe might belong. Like any great work of cultural studies, its object is the truth of the imaginary itself. Mbembe: "I have tried to 'write Africa', not as a fiction, but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, its eccentricities, without laying claim to speak in the name of anyone at all." (17)

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